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GOVERNOR

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October 1, 2008

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FCC-MAILROOM

Hon. Kevin J. Martin, Chair
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street SW
Washington, DC 20554

CC: 05-337
CC: 96-45

Re: Universal Service Fund Support for Rural Wireless Service

Dear Chairman Martin:

I understand that the FCC may be considering modifications to the formula used to determine disbursements from the Universal Service Fund that would cut almost in half the current level of USF support for rural wireless service in Maine. I am writing to you concerning this alarming prospect to urge the FCC to continue USF support for Maine's rural wireless carriers at no less than the present level of support.

Since 2004, Maine's rural wireless carriers - Unice! and United States Cellular Corporation - have used their USF support to construct cell sites in many of Maine's rural communities, including Rumford, Strong, China, Bethel, Fort Kent, Oxford, Orono, Chelsea, Buxton, Pittsfield, Sidney, Lincolnville, Winthrop, Peru, Jonesport, Bingham, Fort Fairfield, and Sedgewick. Prior to the availability of USF support, these towns had either no wireless service at all, or else very poor service.

However, I can tell you from personal experience based on my frequent travels around Maine that many Maine communities and roadways still have no or inadequate wireless service. Continuing USF support at least at the present level will be required for many years before the goal of the 1996 Telecommunications Act of equivalent service in urban and rural areas will be realized in Maine. You should also be aware that poor wireless service both complicates the delivery of public safety services and greatly hinders economic development in rural Maine.

On the public safety front, Maine's sheriffs have taken a very active role in seeking to ensure ongoing USF support for the continued expansion of the wireless network in rural Maine. I am attaching a Resolution recently adopted unanimously by the Maine Sheriffs Association urging continuation of USF support for rural wireless expansion. I would ask you to consider this Resolution carefully and especially its statement that the cuts you are considering "would be harmful to the health, safety and welfare of Maine's citizens."

From the standpoint of economic development, the lack of adequate wireless service in much of rural Maine represents an enormous barrier. Those of us responsible for stimulating business in rural Maine confront this every day, but let me give you just one example: An economic development official was driving a business owner looking to relocate his business to a site in rural Oxford County. En route between the airport and the site, the business owner pulled out his mobile phone, found that there was no service, and told the official to turn the car around and take him back to the airport.



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Likewise, a Report that I commissioned on rural Washington County (where 39,000 people inhabit an area equal in size to Connecticut and Rhode Island put together) observed that "for any business engaged in interstate and/or international commerce, a comprehensive network of broadband and wireless interconnection is as necessary as the telephone – as the computer and cell phones have become indispensable to business. Such infrastructure, however, has established only a tentative toehold in Washington County."

I can understand why it might be difficult for you and your fellow Commissioners to appreciate the tremendously negative impact on a community of poor wireless service. I served several terms as a Congressman representing Maine's rural Second District and in all the years I spent in Washington I don't think I ever had any trouble completing a wireless call. In Maine, however, where poor wireless service is an unfortunate way of life, things are different. I want to share with you the results of a recent independent poll of Maine people on the subject of wireless service and the need for USF support:

- 89% of Maine residents feel it is important to have reliable and consistent cellular phone coverage in rural areas for public health and safety.
- 75% of Maine's residents experience dead zones, dropped calls or very poor call quality while using their cell phone in the state.
- 79% support using federal Universal Service Fund (USF) dollars to fix dead spots and bring consistently reliable service to rural parts of the state, even if it costs all telephone customers two dollars (\$2) per year.
- 80% of Maine's residents support federal policy that funds projects that ensure consumers in rural areas have access to choices in communications services, such as cell phones and other wireless communication services that are comparable in quality and price to those available in urban areas.

As you can see, Maine people, like people elsewhere, just want the same quality of wireless coverage enjoyed by folks living in Washington. They also want an FCC dedicated to redeeming the promise of the 1996 Telecommunications Act: that service in rural areas will be equivalent to that enjoyed in non-rural areas of the Nation. Cutting USF support for wireless service will undercut that goal, hinder much needed economic development and leave Maine people without the quality of wireless infrastructure needed to ensure their health and safety.

Thank you for considering these comments.

Sincerely,



John E. Bardacci
Governor

Cc: Maine Congressional delegation